

New Jersey Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools

Testimony Before the NJ State Board of Education
Presented by Michael Maddaluna, NJCCVTS President-elect and
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Good afternoon. I am Michael Maddaluna, superintendent of the Somerset County Vocational-Technical Schools and President-elect of the NJ Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the proposed changes in New Jersey's high school graduation requirements.

The proposed code (NJAC 6A:8) has some promising elements, such as personalized learning plans and a new emphasis on 21st century skills. However, the NJ Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools remains concerned by the proposed emphasis on a single set of college prep courses and assessments that do not meet the needs of all students. **Revised graduation requirements must recognize the value of career and technical education. State graduation requirements must ensure sufficient flexibility for each student to achieve 21st century skills in a manner that is appropriate for the individual.**

Members of the State Board of Education and NJDOE staff have acknowledged that increasing state graduation requirements will pose a challenge for career and technical education students and the schools that serve them. It is not that our students cannot meet higher academic standards. Rather, our concern is that average students simply will not have time to address all of the current standards, plus the proposed additional course requirements, and still complete a sequence of CTE courses that lead to an industry-recognized credential.

For many of these students, the CTE program is the most important part of their high school experience. What they learn in their shop, culinary classroom or cosmetology studio provides relevancy and maybe even the best reason to finish high school. Their close relationship with the CTE teacher provides the kind of personalization that this code seeks to extend statewide.

None of us wants to see these opportunities reduced. I think we all share the goal of trying to identify some specific mechanisms that will address these concerns while ensuring that CTE students are prepared to succeed in a competitive global economy. I am pleased to be able to offer you some specific recommendations that we believe will provide essential flexibility while ensuring a high level of achievement and sufficient accountability. The attached paper and accompanying chart lay out the details of our proposal, and I will go over the highlights.

New Jersey's high school graduation requirements should recognize a coherent CTE program as a rigorous secondary school experience. Every student needs to graduate from high school well-prepared

for something, but not for the same thing. A student who wants to prepare for the workforce should have the flexibility to pursue academic course requirements geared toward their career pathway and sufficient time to achieve industry credentials.

For example, my district offers a health and science academy where the students will take calculus and graduate from high school with enough college credits for an associate's degree. We are equally proud of our building and construction trades program, which prepares students for entry into carpenter's union apprenticeship program. These students need strong arithmetic skills and some basic algebra and geometry to pass the carpenter's entrance exam. They will continue to build their skills through the four-year apprenticeship, earning credit for college through the NJ PLACE partnership.

Forcing these carpentry students to take Algebra II in high school would be an obstacle to successful entry into the apprenticeship, which the state should recognize as a desirable postsecondary option. Instead of Algebra II, these young men need a third year of math that reinforces the skills required for entry into the union and for success on the job.

The proposed personalized learning plans provide a mechanism to tailor state graduation requirements to specific student needs. New Jersey's county vocational-technical school districts are prepared to "pilot" this approach.

We recommend establishing alternative academic requirements for CTE students that clearly define the expectation of rigorous academic content. For example, a student taking a coherent CTE program should be required to take at least two college-prep math courses, plus a third year of math that addresses their career program. In science, we recommend that CTE students take biology and two additional lab or technical sciences aligned with the career program. Teachers, counselors, and employers can help to define what specific courses are most appropriate for each student.

To ensure accountability, we suggest that each plan include a minimum of three state-defined competency exams addressing English, math, and science, as well as additional measures to demonstrate student competency in essential core curriculum content standards. These might include industry exams, standardized tests, or other measures.

The personalized learning plans and personalized learning options, also known as "option 2," must provide flexibility in some additional areas. Certainly, county vocational schools recognize the value of the arts; my districts and many others offer extensive visual and performing arts programs. But, when an average student is struggling to address tougher academic requirements along with 30 or more credits in a CTE program to prepare for an industry credential, the personalized plan should be able to waive the requirement for 5 credits in the arts.

Similarly, while world language is important, and expected for college-bound students, this is the wrong time to increase the requirement for work-bound CTE students. While they should be encouraged

to achieve language competency, the personalized learning plan should be able to waive this requirement if necessary to afford a CTE student sufficient time to address other academic and technical standards.

County vocational-technical schools will be able to use option 2 as a way to meet curriculum standards for financial/economic literacy through career programs. A portion of the statutory physical education mandate can also be addressed through option 2 to free up some additional time for academic and career study.

Most county vocational-technical schools already have in place clear board policies regarding the use of option 2 to award credit for interdisciplinary coursework, infused academic content, and other required content and they have been using this approach successfully for a number of years.

However, personalized learning options may be more difficult for districts serving students on a shared-time basis. They must deal with numerous sending districts, each with their own policies regarding the award of credit. We recommend that the code address this with language that would require local school districts to extend personalized learning options to shared-time students and accept credits awarded by county vocational-technical schools for academic and other required content.

In addition, if personalized learning plans are implemented statewide beginning in grade 6, local school districts will need to ensure that a student's potential interest in attending a shared-time career and technical education program is considered so that the academic coursework required for smooth transition is fully addressed.

In closing, I thank you for the opportunity to share these ideas and hope that you will review the attached paper and chart providing more details. The State Board of Education, which also serves as NJ's State Board of Career and Technical Education, has always been extremely supportive of CTE students. We appreciate your willingness to fully consider the challenges the proposed graduation requirements will create for shared-time and average students who benefit tremendously from CTE programs. We ask that you support the Council's recommendations as a viable solution that maintains high academic standards, provides accountability, and ensures sufficient flexibility for students to address academic and technical skill standards for success in the 21st century.